

# Military children more likely to have a history of suicide attempts

By Alan Zarembo Contact Reporter

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California high school students who have a parent in the military are far more likely than those from civilian families to have recently attempted suicide, according to a new study.

The findings are based on a survey of ninth and 11th graders at 261 schools across the state. The data were collected in 2012 and 2013.

Of 2,409 students with a parent in the military, 11.7% answered yes when asked if they had attempted suicide in the previous year. For the 21,274 students with civilian parents, that figure was 7.3%.

About a third of the suicide attempts in both groups required medical treatment, the survey said.

The [study](#), published Thursday in the journal *European Child and Adolescent Psychiatry*, did not consider completed suicides.

In trying to explain the results, the researchers said the stresses of more than a decade of war — parents away on long deployments or back home dealing with physical and mental health problems — had trickled down to children in military families.

Historically, military children have been shown to be more psychologically resilient than civilians.

The same held true for service members, too. But between 2004 and 2009, the military suicide rate nearly doubled, catching up to — and in the Army, surpassing — the civilian rate. It has remained elevated, with young rank-and-file soldiers facing the greatest risk.

While it is tempting to blame the rise entirely on the wars, the reality is more complicated. More than half of military suicides involved service members who never deployed.

Researchers say the wars have made life more stressful even for those who never left U.S. soil. They have also found elevated rates of preexisting mental health problems among enlistees.

Far less is known about the mental health of military families. The government does not track or analyze data on suicides among children of service members.

The new study relied on data from a statewide survey conducted for the state Department of Education. More than 1,000 high schools participated in the survey, though only a quarter of them opted to include questions on suicide attempts.

All the schools asked their students — more than 27,000 with a parent in the military and more than 280,000 without — if they had contemplated suicide in the previous year.

Among military children, 23.5% said yes, compared to 18.1% for everybody else.

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By [Jean Rhodes](#) April 14, 2015

### **[Teens from military families are at higher risk for suicide](#)**

Posted by [Eddie North-Hager-USC](#) on March 23, 2015

While the US has increased resources to stem the risk of suicide by soldiers returning from the battlefield, one group may be overlooked: their children.

Teenagers from military families are at greater risk of thinking about, planning, and trying suicide, according to a new study that also finds they are more likely to need medical attention following an attempt.

Nearly 12 percent of military-connected youth in California reported attempting suicide, compared to 7.3 percent of nonmilitary-connected youth. Approximately 24 percent of military-connected youth reported seriously considering suicide compared to 18.1 percent of civilian youth. Military connected youth were at 1.71 more likely to attempt suicide requiring medical treatment than their civilian counterparts.

“Primary health care providers, mental health providers, schools, and other community organizations should work to increase their awareness of the presence of military-connected youth and families that they serve,” researchers write in the paper published in the journal [European Child & Adolescent Psychiatry](#).

“Special consideration should be given for the potential of deployments, relocations, and other adolescent stressors to impact the mental health of military-connected youth.”

“As the nation moves to increase resources for the long-term care of psychological trauma and/or physical injury experienced by veterans and active-duty service persons it is critical that the needs of their children are attended to as well,” says Tamika Gilreath, assistant professor in the School of Social Work at University of Southern California.

“Civilian schools and other community-based youth serving institutions should be aware of both veteran and military-connected youth that they serve and increase resources as needed.”

Data for the study was drawn from the California Healthy Kids Survey, an ongoing survey of 5th, 7th, 9th, and 11th graders administered by WestEd for the California Department of Education.

The survey asks questions about several health-related behaviors and focuses on a sample of 390,028 students in 9th and 11th grade at 1,029 schools who completed the core survey in 2012-2013, as well as 26,142 students in 261 schools who opted to administer a supplementary questionnaire that included questions about additional suicidal behaviors.

Other researchers from USC and from Bar Ilan University in Israel are coauthors of the study.

Source: [USC](#)

## Is Your Military Teen at Risk for Suicide?

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by Judy Davis

I wish I had realized, before my son's attempt on his life, that his abrupt change in behavior was actually an indication that something else was going on.

I'll be the first to admit that it was easier to dismiss what seemed to be "typical" teen behaviors rather than recognize them as the first sign of a more serious issue. And I wish I were an anomaly.

According to a recent study published in the Journal of Adolescent Health, our dependent teens have an increased risk of mental health issues compared to those who do not have a parent or sibling in the military. ([Read more about the study.](#))

It is not surprising really, as our milkids have to deal with so many more challenges than the typical civilian teenager.

But how do we know if a teen's rebellious behaviors are actually indications of depression or suicidal ideation as opposed to what many refer to as teenage "growing pains?"

Sadly, more and more often I'm discovering that my family is not alone in dealing with the residual effects brought on by years at war. The fact is that depression in teen military dependents is on the rise, and frankly it's time we tackled the problem head on before it gets any worse.

As military spouses, we are taught to watch for signs in our servicemembers when it comes to mental health issues, but not so when it comes to our children.

If we are honest with ourselves, we know that many of our children are experiencing the effects of this war in ways we can only begin to understand. The research shows that more than a quarter of them are having difficulties.

So what can we do? The complete and long-term answer is multi-dimensional and complex, but there is a simple response that can become a steppingstone toward effective change.

In order for us to help our children, we need to do two things:

1. We need to educate the military community on the ways to identify at risk youth.
2. We must do whatever it takes to ensure that our children have access to the treatment they need to heal.

You may be surprised to learn that in teens, depression looks very different than it does in an adult. According to [Helpguide.org](http://Helpguide.org), the following symptoms are common in teens suffering from depression but are often dismissed as typical teen behaviors -- causing their condition to go undiagnosed. A teen may display any or all of the following:

- **Irritable or angry mood** -- Irritability, rather than sadness, is often the predominant mood in depressed teens. A depressed teenager may be grumpy, hostile, easily frustrated, or prone to angry outbursts.
- **Unexplained aches and pains** -- Depressed teens frequently complain about physical ailments such as headaches or stomach aches. If a thorough physical exam does not reveal a medical cause, these aches and pains may indicate depression.
- **Extreme sensitivity to criticism** -- Depressed teens are plagued by feelings of worthlessness, making them extremely vulnerable to criticism, rejection and failure. This is a particular problem for "over-achievers."
- **Withdrawing from some, but not all people** -- While adults tend to isolate themselves when depressed, teenagers usually keep up at least some friendships. However, teens with depression may socialize less than before, pull away from their parents, or start hanging out with a different crowd.

*Note: If you notice that your teen is exhibiting the above symptoms and they last longer than two weeks, it's time to reach out for help from the [suicide prevention resources available for the military community](#).*

So what can we do when we suspect our child is dealing with something more serious than a simple case of "teenager-itis"?

The best answer is to get them to a specialist, someone skilled at working with teens, as soon as possible.

When it comes to depression and other similar behavioral health issues, it is important to err on the side of caution and get an expert opinion from a doctor who can diagnose what is going on and coordinate the necessary treatment.

Depression isn't something that your child will outgrow, nor is it something that they will be able to "soldier-on" through. Depression is a serious condition that needs treatment as soon as one suspects that their child may be experiencing difficulty.

From experience, I can tell you that one of the reasons that my son is still with us today is because we never brushed aside his struggles with dealing with military life. We addressed things head on and got him to a specialist the moment his behavior began to change.

While it didn't prevent his choice to self-medicate with prescription meds and alcohol, it did open a line of communication and understanding that allowed him to reach out to us when things became too much for him to handle.

As parents, the best way to help our military teens is to keep talking (not lecturing), keep listening (not judging) and keep interested and involved in their lives.

Understand that they grow up quickly as military kids and they deal with situations far beyond their years. As adults, it's up to us to show them unconditional love and understanding while being willing to take the steps necessary to get them the help they need should circumstances arise.

I believe we can begin to change this horrific trend by making sure that every military child knows that they are not alone in their journey through the challenges and changes of military life. We can show them that as a community we see their struggles and are here to help. And we can make a difference one child at a time...

*-- Motivational speaker, author and blogger Judy Davis has a passion for inspiring military spouses to become stronger and more resilient using her powerful "One Moment at a Time" philosophy. Read her blog at <http://thedirectiondiva.com/>.*